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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 011629

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2016

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOI](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: CUBA CRACKING DOOR OPEN TO MORE CATHOLIC CLERGY

REF: A. HAVANA 10604

[1](#)B. STATE 60294

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Cuban Government has eased its strict limits on issuing work permits to foreign Catholic clergy. The GOC has long adhered to a policy of approving new applicants only to the extent that they replace clergy who have stopped working in Cuba. However, since June 2005, the GOC has granted work permits to eight priests and 14 nuns who entered Cuba as non-replacements. The GOC also has allowed into the country three new Catholic congregations, or "orders." In addition, the country's 13 bishops are now enjoying limited Internet access, following their November 2005 meeting with Fidel Castro. The number of Catholic priests in Cuba remains minuscule at 344, in country of 11.2 million. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The GOC has eased its strict limits on issuing work permits to foreign Catholic clergy, according to Havana's Nunciature First Secretary Antoine Camilleri. On May 18, Camilleri told Poloff that, in the past, the GOC kept the number of foreign Catholic clergy in Cuba constant by only approving new applicants to replace foreign clergy who were finishing their tours of duty in Cuba. However, since June 2005, the GOC has granted work permits to eight priests and 14 nuns who entered Cuba as non-replacements. In addition, the GOC has, for the first time in recent memory, allowed into the country three new Catholic congregations, or "orders," including Franciscan nuns from Colombia. "The fact that three new congregations have been allowed in is very encouraging," Camilleri said. "This is something new, certainly not seen in recent years. (It marks) a departure from the GOC's traditional way of doing things."

[1](#)3. (C) In another positive development for the Church, the country's 13 bishops are for the first time enjoying official Internet access, albeit in a limited manner. The 13 still lack Internet access at their offices or homes, but they can go online at the Havana headquarters of the Conference of Bishops. This service began in December 2005 or January 2006, shortly after the bishops' November 2005 meeting with Fidel Castro. Said Camilleri: "I'm not going to say this is a direct result (of the meeting), but... you could attribute it to the new climate."

[1](#)4. (C) The number of Catholic priests in Cuba remains tiny at 344, serving a country of 11.2 million, of which the Church estimates that 60 percent were baptized as Catholics. Of these 344, Camilleri said, 188 are "diocesan" (aka "secular") and 156 "religious" priests. Among the "religious" priests in Cuba, including Dominicans, Jesuits and Franciscans, the majority are non-Cuban; many are from Spain or Mexico.

COMMENT

15. (C) Deep fissures remain in the relationship between the GOC and the Catholic Church. While most of Cuba's Church figures realize that totalitarian repression is inconsistent with Christian teachings, the Church's hierarchy in Havana has decided that accommodation with the government is necessary to keep the Church open. The GOC's relaxation of its policies on Internet access and work permits for clergy is a step in the right direction, but is in a context that also includes intense harassment of priests who criticize the regime. This past spring, for example, a French-citizen priest who, according to parishoners, had a penchant for speaking forcefully on human rights themes in his weekly homilies, was summarily transferred out of Cuba. This is just the latest example.

PARMLY